

February 12, 2005

A Grammy Hawaii Can Call Its Own

By LOLA OGUNNAIKE

For any number of residents of the continental United States, Hawaiian music boils down to five letters: Don Ho. But the islands' music scene has been more than just "Tiny Bubbles" for decades, a fact that the Grammys have finally seen fit to acknowledge this year by adding a prize for best Hawaiian music album to the awards being handed out tomorrow night.

The road to recognition has been a bumpy one.

Musicians, record labels and government officials have petitioned the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, which gives out the Grammys, for more than a decade. The biggest obstacle was defining what exactly Hawaiian music is. Ukuleles and slack key guitar? Jawaiian, a fusion of reggae and traditional rhythms?

"That was definitely a hot-button issue," said Warren Wyatt, president of Worldsound, a popular Hawaiian label that is home to two of the nominated acts.

The debate, Mr. Wyatt explained, centered on how much of an album should be recorded in the Hawaiian language and how much in English. "You have purists that want to have 100 percent in the Hawaiian language," he said, "and then you have contemporary artists that would have liked to see no restriction one way or another."

Ultimately the academy decided that the award would be for recordings of a more traditional nature. "Hawaiian music must be used in a predominance of the vocal tracks," said Lourdes Lopez, a Grammy Awards spokeswoman. Though Ms. Lopez did not offer a specific number, it is widely understood that the criterion is 51 percent in Hawaiian.

The five nominees in the new category are all by veteran acts: "Some Call It Aloha Don't Tell" by the Brothers Cazimero, "Amy & Willie Live" by Amy Hanaiali'i Gilliom & Willie K, "Cool Elevation" by Ho'okena, "Ke'alaokamaile" by Keali'i Reichel, and "Slack Key Guitar, Volume 2," a compilation. Several of these acts have won dozens of Hoku awards, Hawaii's version of the Grammy.

The Grammys, which will be broadcast live from Los Angeles by CBS, grow more exhaustive, or exhausting, each year. Golden phonographs are awarded for best polka album and best spoken word album for children. Besides the prize for Hawaiian music, categories have been added this year for best gospel performance, best electronic/dance album, and best surround-sound album, bringing the grand total to 107.

The nomination was particularly special for Ms. Hanaiali'i, whose grandmother, Jennie Napua Wodd, proselytized for Hawaiian music, performing at Manhattan nightspots and hotels in the 30's, 40's and 50's. "If I win," Ms. Hanaiali'i said in a telephone interview, "it will be like I'm winning for her."

Mr. Reichel was, as they often say on awards night, also happy to have been nominated. "Firsts are very important in the Hawaiian culture," he said. "This is the culmination of the work of chanters, singers and poetry writers that dates back over a thousand years."

He is decidedly in the purist camp. "We wanted 75 percent of the album to be in Hawaiian," Mr. Reichel said, "but we compromised on 51 percent. If you're going to call it 'Hawaiian music,' it should be culturally based, and English is not the basis of our culture."

The percentage issue has made for heated conversation on Web sites and in Hawaiian newsrooms. Eric Lagrimas, manager

of licensing and promotion at Quiet Storm Records, a Kaneohe, Hawaii-based label, said, "It's been an intense debate for about five years."

And the conversation continues. Na Leo, one of the most popular female Hawaiian music groups, was passed over by the Grammys because its latest album, "Find Harmony," was largely in English.

"These are local musicians using traditional instruments like the ukulele or native drums, and they deserve as much attention as the purists," said Mr. Lagrimas, whose label distributes a number of contemporary acts. "It's unfortunate that there has to be this division."

Deborah Semer, the former executive director of the Pacific Northwest chapter of the recording academy, which covers Hawaii, said that she hoped that a byproduct of the award criterion was that artists will be more eager to record in their native tongue.

"It's helping to preserve the culture," she said. "There's nothing better than that." Not even a Grammy.

[Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)